

HIFICRITIC



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Koetsu Urushi Vermilion

The Koetsu *Urushi Sky Blue* sailed through our tests (*Vol3 No1*), giving particularly good results in the extraordinary Continuum *Criterion* turntable. The *Urushis* come in a number of different cosmetic finishes: *Wajima*, *Tsugaru*, *Vermilion*, *Sky Blue*, *Black* and *Gold*, with just small price differences. All have lacquered rosewood bodies, but this *Vermilion* differs from the other *Urushis* in having double coils and half the output voltage.

Coil windings are of silver clad copper, the latter of six nines purity (LCOCC), and use a samarium-cobalt magnet (subjectively preferred on tonal balance with this design of motor geometry and poles). The naked diamond stylus is described as a quadrahedron, which denotes a form of extended line contact elliptical, while the solid boron cantilever is now a popular choice. Compliance is a low 5mm/N (cu), suited to medium and higher mass arms, the coil impedance is a low 5ohms with negligible inductance, the cartridge weighs a moderate 9g, and the current UK price is £3,800. Tracking force is specified at 1.8-2g, but up to 2.2g is permissible. Nominal output is fairly low at 0.2mV, and it's uncritical of loading (100 - 10,000ohms).

While I could not fully repeat that dizzy plateau without the *Criterion*, my own full feature Linn *LP12/Naim ARO* combination with usefully interchangeable arm tops enabled very easy and direct comparisons between the *Vermilion* and *Sky Blue* models. Naim's *Superline* and the Audio Research *Reference 2 Phono* both proved quiet enough, but the *Vermilion's* quite low output (about 6dB less than the *Blue*) does need a really quiet m-c pre-amp; at this quality level the merest trace of hiss, flicker noise or hum will detract significantly from the performance and make its great expense questionable.

While the *Blue's* fine tonal accuracy and imaging deserved strong recommendation, the *Vermilion* was still something of a surprise. Taking care to correct fully for that 6dB level difference, the characteristic *Urushi* sound is still expressed, but with greater sophistication and superior insight. It's a little cooler and more neutral, but also subtly clearer, with sharper focus, greater image depth, broader and deeper soundstages, and more detail. There is also slightly less bounce and drama. The differences are not huge, but the *Blue* sounds more robust and cheerful, the *Vermilion* more spacious and less upfront (not that the *Blue* is particularly up-front in absolute terms). The *Vermilion* sounds clean with low audible distortion, high groove stability, and really solid tracking that sounds clean with sharp focus to end of side.

The slightly rich, dynamic and just slightly 'powerful' mid-bass, a Koetsu hallmark, adds some drama, weight and drive to rock material. This foot-tapper of a cartridge unquestionably times well, yet it also sounds very neutral and sophisticated in

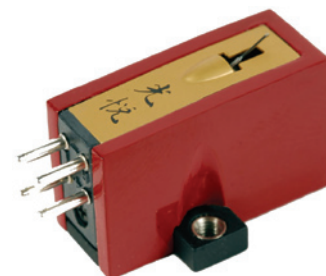
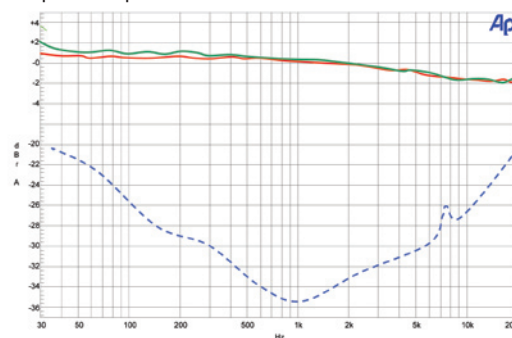
the right system, with a notably clean treble. Voices sounded special: palpable, expressive and highly articulate, again a plus with rock music. Drum and rhythm playing had notable character, with clean tune differentiation and strong listener involvement, giving a very high overall score of 160.

Lab testing confirmed the low 0.2mV output. The frequency response is classically mildly down-tilted, though less than many, more or less flat 100Hz to 1kHz and then drifting gently down to -8dB by 4kHz and -1.6dB by 20kHz, there is also an average of 1.5dB of lower bass lift rising a little at very low frequencies towards the arm/cartridge resonance, here +10dB at 12.5Hz. Midband channel balance (0.25dB) was very good, and better still at high frequencies, while good separation was well maintained over a wide range, indicating an accurately built generator. The low compliance means that tracking was not the very best, but music tracks were well handled at around 2g.

Conclusions

Provided the replay system can handle the low output level, this *Urushi* will deliver subtle rhythms and dynamic punch with natural articulate voices and great stereo imaging, particularly in focus and depth. Distortions are low, the frequency range is wide, and channel separation is very good. Suited to medium-to-high (12-20g) effective mass tonearms, it may also be confidently recommended.

Koetsu Urushi Vermillion Cartridge Frequency Response/Separation



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Manufacturer: Koetsu	Model Urushi Vermilion	UK Price c£ 3,700
Type low output MC	Nominal output: 0.2mV	Impedance 5 ohms
Cantilever: boron rod	Line contact diamond	Enclosed body
Weight: 9g	Recommended downforce: 1.9g	Loading: 20ohms or more
Output: 0.16mV for 3.45cm/s	Frequency response 50Hz-10kHz	+1, -1.7dB
Channel Balance: 0.3dB at 1kHz	Frequency response 30Hz-20kHz	+2.1, -1.9dB
Separation:	typically 28dB (50Hz - 8kHz)	20dB at 20kHz
Distortion:	300Hz lateral +9dB 0.36 %	300Hz vertical +6dB 2.1 %
Trackability:	300Hz lateral +15dB: 2.2g	300Hz vertical +12dB: 1.7g
Supertrack (+18dB lateral)		Failed at 4g
Stylus finish and alignment	excellent	excellent
LF resonance, 12g tonearm	12.5Hz	Rise: 10dB
Suggested arm type	effective mass 12-20g	Damping: optional